

# Chapter 8

## Eichmann's Approach During His Interviews and Trial

*Had we put 10.3 million Jews to death, then I would be content and say good, we destroyed the enemy.*<sup>300</sup> – Adolf Eichmann (1957 interview)

To conclude the section on Eichmann, this study references his testimonies – particularly one from an interview with Dutch journalist and Nazi sympathizer Willem Sassen, and another from his trial. When announcing Eichmann's capture, David Ben-Gurion described him as one of those responsible for the "Final Solution".<sup>301</sup> Israeli justice Gabriel Bach, a key figure who served as assistant prosecutor alongside Gideon Hausner during the Eichmann trial, recounts reading a previous testimony from Rudolph Höss, the commander of Auschwitz. Höss testified that he mentioned his occasional inner conflict about killing children, and Eichmann's response expressing a belief that they should be the primary targets for extermination as they represented the destruction of future Jewish generations. Eichmann questioned the logic of eliminating older generations while sparing the younger ones, who could potentially reconstitute the targeted race.<sup>302</sup>

In 1957, Wilhelm Sassen conducted interviews with Adolf Eichmann regarding his involvement in the Nazis' Final Solution. These interviews were actually group discussions organized by Sassen and his publisher, Eberhard Fritsch, held at Sassen's Buenos Aires residence on several Sundays. While others were present, it was Eichmann's disclosures that predominantly shaped the discussions. These memoirs served as the foundation for a series of articles published in late 1960 in *Life* and *Stern* magazines. In 1980, the Sassen documents, commonly known as the Sassen tapes, were handed over to Eichmann's widow, Veronika. The documentary series "The Devil's Confession: The Lost Eichmann Tapes", directed by Yariv Mozer and produced by Kobi Sitt, presented audio recordings of Eichmann detailing his involvement in the Holocaust. It was screened on Israeli television in 2022. In one

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<sup>300</sup> The recordings were publicly shared in the new documentary *The Devil's Confession: The Lost Eichmann Tapes*, which aired on July 15, 2022. See <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/07/15/the-eichmann-tapes-and-the-nature-of-evil>, and the discussion on chapter 15 part VI.

<sup>301</sup> See the 11-minute mark in this documentary about Adolf Eichmann, titled "The Face of Evil": [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_QrCxa8IAFo&t=679s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QrCxa8IAFo&t=679s). More information about Eichmann's role in the Holocaust and his trial can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBbFxk-H9tE&t=978s>.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid. See minutes 1:07–1:12.

chilling segment, Eichmann is heard stating, “If we had killed 10.3 million Jews, I would say with satisfaction, ‘Good, we destroyed an enemy’ – then we would have fulfilled our mission”.<sup>303</sup>

The critical inquiry revolves around assessing the veracity of Eichmann’s statements during these interviews and his trial, particularly given the discrepancies between them. Eichmann, being directly involved as a perpetrator, raises concerns about the reliability of his testimony. To analyze this, Christopher Browning’s criteria become crucial. Browning relied on perpetrators’ testimony for his book “Ordinary Men”, which delved into the actions of German police units involved in killings.<sup>304</sup> Similarly, Waitman Wade Beorn used such testimonies in his research on related topics. The approaches of these scholars offer a framework for evaluating Eichmann’s statements, taking into account the complexities and potential biases inherent in perpetrator testimonies.<sup>305</sup> Christopher Browning presents four valuable criteria for evaluating the credibility of this kind of testimony. They include: 1. *The Self-Interest Test*: Assessing whether the witness’s statements go against their own interests or align with them, determining potential motivations for honesty or falsehood. 2. *The Vividness Test*: Evaluating the level of detail and clarity in the witness’s recollection, particularly concerning visual memory of events. 3. *The Possibility Test*: Verifying whether the claims made by the witness can be substantiated or if they contradict known facts or established impossibilities. 4. *The Probability Test*: Examining whether the testimony corresponds with established patterns of events suggested by other reliable sources or documentation. These criteria offer a structured approach to gauge the reliability and truthfulness of testimonies, aiding in the critical assessment of accounts provided by individuals involved in historical events.<sup>306</sup>

In this context, as this chapter will further explore, Eichmann’s interviews with William Sassen seem to offer a more candid account of his role, including his admission of responsibility for the mass killings of Jews, particularly through his orchestration of transports in Hungary. However, during the trial, the court chose not to use the Life magazine article against him, as it had been published

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<sup>303</sup> See on Amazon Prime, part A, “The Devil Confession: The Lost Eichmann Tapes”, and this review at <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/426316/>, Katz, David, Review: The Devil’s Confession: The Lost Eichmann Tapes, 2022. The quote is an English translation of his original words in German.

<sup>304</sup> Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Holocaust in Poland*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1992.

<sup>305</sup> Waitman Wade Beorn, “Descent into Darkness: The Local Participation of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust in Belarus, 1941–2,” PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010, p. 24.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

without his consent.<sup>307</sup> During this interview, Eichmann seems to have revealed more of the truth than he did during his court testimony, as this study argues. His motives, as explored in various documentaries, seem understandable: after holding immense power and responsibility, living in Argentina left him feeling like an ordinary individual, stripped of the authority and significance he once had. The interview not only gave him the attention he craved but also seemed to rekindle a sense of pride in his actions. He was eager to preserve his testimony for posterity, asking Sassen not to release the tapes until after his death, likely as a precaution for his own safety. However, during the trial, Eichmann attempted to plead not guilty, shifting responsibility onto his superiors, claiming he merely followed orders. Yet, concurrently, he did acknowledge his organizational role in managing transportation. This duality suggests a complex strategy aimed at minimizing personal culpability while acknowledging his function within the system.<sup>308</sup> Therefore, Eichmann essentially admitted to actively carrying out the logistics of transportation, detailing how he orchestrated the trains and the methodology involved. This acknowledgment positions him as directly involved in the main execution of these actions. However, the notable shift during his trial was attributing the orders to higher authorities, emphasizing that he solely managed the trains. In contrast, during his discussions with Sassen, he took responsibility for the planning and positioned himself as the primary orchestrator or the "Ventriloquist." This distinction portrays a nuanced narrative where Eichmann both accepts direct responsibility for planning and executing actions while also attempting to deflect accountability by highlighting orders from above during the trial.

British historian David Cesarani expanded on this, highlighting Eichmann's boastful claims during the interviews, presenting himself as an idealist in the implementation of the Final Solution. Eichmann expressed contentment in knowing he had eliminated five million enemies of the Reich, and he cites his involvement in Hungary. He also noted that the failure to annihilate the entire 10.3 million Jewish population was due to political disagreements within the Nazi movement and the SS headquarters, a fact he regretted. Cesarani's analysis contradicts Hannah Arendt's

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<sup>307</sup> See the documentary on Amazon Prime, "The Devil Confession: The Lost Eichmann Tapes", Part 2. The deliberation centered on whether to prioritize his approach in the interview or his testimony in court. The court's decision not to consider what he mentioned in the interview, aimed to demonstrate its commitment to legitimacy and fairness.

<sup>308</sup> This is also discussed in the documentaries.

perspective that Eichmann was a lower-ranking bureaucrat, instead emphasizing that Eichmann played a substantial and influential role in the Holocaust.<sup>309</sup>

This further demonstrates Eichmann's influence and how, despite the constraints of the Nazi system and its structure, he found ways to exert power – particularly evident in Hungary, where he skillfully utilized Hungarian collaborators. This study challenges Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" thesis regarding Eichmann, which depicts him as a detached bureaucrat merely following orders without advancing an ideology.<sup>310</sup> According to Arendt, Eichmann exemplified how individuals could become equally redundant, acting in a banal manner by simply following orders. Arendt appeared to endorse Eichmann's trial assertion that he was genuinely adhering to orders rather than his alternate version presented in the interview with Sassen. It's possible that Arendt speculated Eichmann might have exaggerated his role during the interview to emphasize his significance while residing in Argentina. While this interpretation presents an intriguing perspective, it diverges from the prevailing view established earlier in this study, as it seems to lend credence to Eichmann's version from the interview. However, the study does embrace Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, acknowledging the potential for

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<sup>309</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_QrCxa8IAFo&t=679s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QrCxa8IAFo&t=679s). Further insights into Arendt's perspective can be found in the following footnote. David Cesarani addressed this topic in the documentary between 1 hour and 10 minutes to 1 hour and 12 minutes, alongside other segments throughout the film. In 2005, he authored "Eichmann: His Life and Crimes", a comprehensive biography of Adolf Eichmann. The primary objective of the book was to challenge Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" thesis concerning Eichmann. Arendt's thesis portrayed Eichmann as a mere bureaucrat distant from the brutalities of the Holocaust, simply following orders rather than actively promoting Nazi ideology. Cesarani's account strongly opposes this perspective, providing a detailed portrayal of Eichmann's deep adherence to Nazi ideology. He argues that Arendt's interpretation of the Eichmann trial was influenced by her bias against the Eastern European Jewish background of the prosecutor, Gideon Hausner. The book was published in the United States under the title "Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a 'Desk Murderer'" (Da Capo Press, 2006). In Chapter 15, the study will further explore the issue of Cesarani's criticism of Arendt and delve into Tuija Parvikko's approach to her perspective.

<sup>310</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin Books, 2006, pp. 123–134. In 1961, Arendt reported on the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker*, leading to her controversial 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, first published in the U.S. and later in West Germany. In it, Arendt challenges conventional views on the Holocaust, suggesting that mass murder can be understood through the concept of mass society, where individuals become redundant and act in a banal, conformist manner. The book sparked controversy, with many criticizing Arendt's use of the term 'banality' to describe mass murder. Some note that Eichmann, in an interview with Willem Sassen, claimed he acted with fanaticism and reflected on his orders rather than blindly following them. This will be further discussed in Chapter 10.

ordinary people to follow orders and commit atrocities, a theme that will be further elaborated on in Chapter 15.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a renowned Israeli Orthodox Jewish public intellectual, echoed a similar perspective to Arendt's, deeming the entire Eichmann trial a failure.<sup>311</sup> Leibowitz attributed its shortcomings to a perceived conspiracy between Adenauer and Ben-Gurion, suggesting that it was aimed at absolving Germany's name through the payment of millions.<sup>312</sup> Hannah Yablonka writes that Leibowitz claims Eichmann was a small cog in a large system and merely followed orders, a viewpoint this study opposes and disproves.<sup>313</sup> Instead, this study highlights Eichmann's active role and how he seized opportunities in Hungary, often making decisions independently. In the upcoming section, we'll delve deeper into the Hungarian context and explore why Eichmann perceived an opportunity in leveraging Hungarian collaboration to advance his plans against the Jews. Figure 11 features a well-known photograph of Adolf Eichmann in his SS uniform, portraying him as a figure of authority. Figure 12 depicts Hungarian Regent Miklos Horthy, whose position and role have been thoroughly analyzed in this study.

This study presents a disagreement with Arendt's perspective on Eichmann's role. However, before proceeding, it's important to emphasize two points of agreement. First, the study acknowledges the significance of Arendt's "banality of evil" concept in understanding how individuals can normalize actions that lead to perpetration. Second, while rejecting Yeshayahu Leibowitz's view and identifying Eichmann as a pivotal figure, the study also recognizes the political considerations highlighted by Hannah Yablonka in her book. For instance, Ben-Gurion's selection of witnesses and prioritization of those aligned with him, avoiding individuals associated with Irgun, reveals political motivations aimed at elevating his position and securing political gains. These matters aren't the central focus of this study.

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<sup>311</sup> Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994) was an Israeli Orthodox Jewish polymath. He was a professor of biochemistry, organic chemistry, and neurophysiology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was known for prolific writing on Jewish thought and philosophy. He gained attention for outspoken views on ethics, religion, and politics, cautioning against elevating Israel and Zionism above humanist values. He highlighted the dehumanizing impact of the occupation on both victims and oppressors.

<sup>312</sup> Yablonka, *The States of Israel Vs. Adolf Eichmann*, p. 245.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 11:** Adolf Eichmann, SS official in charge of deporting European Jewry. Germany, 1943.  
Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *DIZ Muenchen GMBH*, *Sueddeutscher Verlag Bilderdienst*.



**Figure 12:** Miklós Horthy, Regent of Hungary, 1941. Credit: Képes Vasárnap [journal], 05.12.1941 (volume 63, issue 49, via Wikimedia).